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# THE ORANG-UTAN IN ENGLAND: AN EXPLANATION FOR THE USE OF *YAHOO* AS A NAME FOR THE AUSTRALIAN HAIRY MAN

GRAHAM JOYNER
*P.O. Box 253, Kingston ACT 2604, Australia*

ABSTRACT: The Australian hairy man or Yahoo was the subject of speculation throughout most of the 19th Century and beyond. The name Yahoo was often held to be an aboriginal word, although it was also attributed to Swift. It is suggested that the word Yahoo was used to describe the adult orang-utan when that animal first arrived in England. This appears to be the reason for its use in Australia.

Among unresolved problems surrounding the Australian hairy man to which a solution might be attempted, one of the most intriguing concerns the name Yahoo, by which the legendary creature was known to Australians of European origin throughout much of the 19th Century. The curious fact is that, on the unanimous testimony of the earliest writers who mention the matter, the name Yahoo was also used by the Australian aborigines themselves, and belonged, or so it is implied, to one of their languages. Consequently, it came to be considered an aboriginal name. How did this happen? At least one writer who was aware of the difficulty involved realized that the name was used in Swift's political satire *Gulliver's Travels,* but thought this was simply a coincidence. This is obviously an unsatisfactory conclusion, and another explanation must be sought.

In so doing, there is no need to refer to the large mass of later material describing the Yahoo reports (Joyner 1977, 1980). Instead, a brief discussion of the earliest Australian records, together with an examination of certain events in England at the very beginning of the period under consideration, will throw some light on the probable origin of the word as it was used in Australia.

The earliest known description of the Yahoo is that of 1842 in the *Australian and New Zealand Monthly Magazine.* Here the Yahoo appears as the subject of an aboriginal superstition, a hideous monster of unearthly character and ape-like appearance, although we are told, curiously enough, that there had long been contention among Australian naturalists as to whether or not such an animal actually existed. In her *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales,* published in 1844, Louisa Ann Meredith refers briefly to an aboriginal belief in the "Yahoo" or "Devil-devil" as a kind of bad spirit.

The name also appears in the 1847 book *Settlers and Convicts* by a writer passing under the name of Alexander Harris, although the reference to the Yahoo is in the summary at the head of a chapter, and not in the text itself. The latter carries only a description of a man-like animal spoken about by

the aborigines of the region of the Hunter River. This discrepancy indicates that the name was thought sufficiently well known when the book was published in 1947, but that it was not known to the aborigines around 1830, or whenever the author had actually been engaged in cutting cedar. Finally, a newspaper report from 1847 contains a reference to a carnivorous "Yaahoo" known to the natives at Hunter River.

Descriptions of the Australian Yahoo, wild man, or hairy man of the woods are, it may be supposed, heavily dependent upon earlier English perceptions of the orang-utan. It is well known that this once mysterious creature was commonly called "wild man of the woods" in its own Southeast Asia habitat, but is has not previously been demonstrated that the orang-utan was probably also known by the name Yahoo. Evidence for this is provided by the following two examples. According to the *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury* of 22 April, 1814, an exhibition in Lincoln of T. Shore's superb collection of living rarities included "the Great Yahoo, or Wild Man of the Woods," while a handbill belonging to the period 1810 to 1820, printed in Boston and now in the Ferguson Collection of the Australian National Library (Ferguson 1941), bears the intelligence that "Two surprising large Yohoes; or, Wild Men of the Woods," might be seen among the exhibits in a traveling menagerie.

An adult orang-utan had been captured in Borneo about 1780. The creature was killed because of its supposed fierce resistance, and was sent preserved in spirits of rum to the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences. From there it may have been shipped to Holland. In any event, the Secretary of the Society, Baron von Wurmb, prepared a detailed description of this "large Orang Outang," which appeared in English in *The Philosophical Magazine* for August, 1798. Meanwhile, Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire had found a skeleton in the Museum of Natural History in Paris, which he supposed to have been that of the animal shipped to Holland by Wurmb. A translation of his description of the "large orang outang" was printed in *The Philosophical Magazine* of September, 1798. Even though Saint-Hilaire concluded (wrongly) that this was not the orang-utan but an entirely new species, the skeleton was nevertheless the first tangible evidence of the existence of a man-sized ape (Greene 1959).

The date when an adult orang-utan was first exhibited in England has never been determined. This must have occurred in the early years of the 19th Century, however, and it may be conjectured that expressions like "the Great Yahoo" or "large Yohoes" were used at the time to distinguish the size and novel appearance of the animal.

The popular use of Yahoo at this time in England was not inconsistent with its appearance in Australian literature several decades later. The otherwise unaccountable attribution of the word to the Australian aborigines



may merely indicate the facility with which the latter had assimilated a new language.

A further inference may perhaps be drawn from the knowledge that words used to describe the Australian Yahoo or hairy man are those associated with descriptions of the orang-utan, the various "wild men" of the 18th Century, and, at a later date, the gorilla. As often in Australia as no doubt elsewhere, a familiar name was applied to an alien form. There is consequently no need to assume that the hairy man was man-like, except insofar as it was large, tailless, covered with hair or fur, and capable of walking upright.

Descriptions likening it to the wombat or native "bear" may be nearer to the truth, as may be Henry Lawson's remark that the hairy man was thought by some to be the last of a species of Australian animals which hadn't been discovered yet. Perhaps the Yahoo was indeed some entirely unknown animal, like the projected Pleistocene species *Phascolarctos stirtoni* (Bartholomai 1968). Whatever the case may be, the problems are as much conceptual as technical.

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